

Friday Night Theology, 17th September, 2009.

Living Simply?

Since the collapse of Lehman Brothers a year ago, the economic crisis has rarely left the news stories. This week, the [Archbishop of Canterbury](#) argued that there had been a lack of repentance and accepting of responsibility in the banking industry for the mistakes made. While the Archbishop may be right, Jesus told us very clearly to first examine the logs in our own eyes before we point the finger at others. All of us are probably guilty of greed and excess in one form or another. None of us living in the West are immune from the lure of ipods, holidays, fashion and so on. And our definition of living simply and giving generously will depend on how we think our lifestyle compares to those around us – including the city bankers.

Sometimes it's convenient to think the harder messages Jesus spoke must be for someone else. Yet Jesus had a lot to say about poverty and wealth that applies to us all and which wasn't always comfortable. He loved the rich young ruler, but wasn't going to make his message more palatable by telling the man that he didn't actually have to sell everything and give it to the poor (Mark 9:21). He told us to seek first God's kingdom and that stuff like food and clothing will follow (Matthew 6:33). Why did he say all this though – was it just to make life difficult and miserable for his followers?

It doesn't take much research to realise that there are a lot of people today with a huge number of possessions who just aren't happy. I suspect the idea that possessions don't equal happiness was just as true in the 1st Century as it is today. Jesus knew that it's easy to quickly become defined by the status symbols of our possessions, rather than our identity in Him. Similarly, the Archbishop spoke about [the danger](#) of "projecting of reality and substance on to things that don't have them." The rich young ruler's identity was so tied up in his belongings that he couldn't give them up, despite the promise of something far better in the long run: treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21).

Of course Jesus didn't say that money and possessions are inherently wrong – he relied on the wealth of women to support his ministry (Luke 8:3). But what does matter is our use of them: directed towards putting God and other people first. Neither did Jesus say enjoying life is bad; he certainly knew how to enjoy a celebratory feast for a special occasion with friends – I doubt the wedding at Cana served up Tesco value!

Perhaps though, our culture has become so tied to its possessions that we no longer realise the hold they have. Perhaps too, we are so used to having things whenever we want them, we have lost the value of a feast and saving for special occasions. That's why in October the Evangelical Alliance is encouraging folks to take a month scaling down their lifestyles, living on the equivalent of benefits and giving the rest away, through an initiative called [Simplify](#). This challenge to re-evaluate how we use our money might just turn out to be releasing as we realise what we can do without and how we can use more effectively what we do have for God's purposes – and that there's huge satisfaction in that. We might just find out that this isn't about dogmatic asceticism, a desire to take all the fun out of life, but that in simplifying our lifestyles, we discover a bit more just what Jesus meant when he said he had come to give us life

in all it's fullness...life that finds it's identity first and foremost in him, and not in what we own. Surely it's worth trying for a month at least.

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